

EDITORIAL

We often hear critics making remarks about the Japanese lack of the sense of permanency, and among other causes they refer this to the influence of Buddhism. Has the Buddhist idea of impermanence really something to do with the Japanese character which expresses itself nowadays in the filmsiness of houses, the imperfect conditions of streets, or other forms of public utility? We were under the same impression for some time, but have lately come to the conclusion that the Buddhist teaching of *anicca* (transitoriness of things) has had no such effect on the Japanese at least as far as their material life is concerned.

If Buddhism teaches the impermanency of things, it also teaches the eternality of the Dharma (truth). The Japanese could be impressed by the latter just as much as the former. There is no reason why the former alone is to be brought out prominently and not the latter. Besides, even when we construct shattery houses, several conditions we can think of as contributing to this: for instance, the most efficient cause may lie in the native character of the people themselves; it may come from shortage of proper material, it may be due to the geographical, meteorological, or geological peculiarities of this island empire. And there are a few more questions we have to consider: How were we before Buddhism had come to this country? How are the Indians, Burmese, Javanese, Tibetans, Chinese, Koreans, and central Asiatic peoples, among whom, we have good reason to believe, Buddhism has had as much moral and spiritual influence as among ourselves?

As far as buildings go, no other people on earth, per-

haps except Egyptians, could ever have constructed such solid, permanent architecture as the Chinese have, before as well as after the introduction of Buddhism into that land. Had Confucianism or Taoism anything to do with this side of Chinese character? Taoism, if anything, at least in its earlier form, was too transcendental to be concerned with affairs of this changing and artificial world. As to Confucianism, its principal interests lay in our moral and social relations and did not go deep enough into the spiritual side of life. Confucianism helped the Chinese to build up a stronger political institution and a solidier foundation of social life, but it had a very little to do, as far as we could see, with stimulating the people to the elaboration of deep philosophical systems and to the realisation of the inmost religious faith. The solidity of Chinese architecture in such contrast to the Japanese is quite an independent expression of the racial character of the people, in which none of the existing religious beliefs had share. So with the flimsiness of Japanese buildings, we are unable to trace any specific relation between this fact and the Buddhist doctrine of impermanency.

Some critics, referring to Christianity as teaching the immortality of an individual, personal soul, the conception of which forms the basis of Western civilisation, according to their view, in its moral and material phases, are disposed to regard Christianity as efficiently contributing to the solidity and permanency of its arts and public works. But unfortunately they forget that Christianity was also once as monastic and world-flying as Buddhism, and that for the sake of a future life, the Christians make light of the present. It is true that Buddhism teaches *Anatman*, the non-ego theory, but this is quite a complex idea and it takes a great intellectual mind to comprehend it fully; to all practical purposes, the Buddhist doctrine of karma, that is, its perpetual working in the life of an individual or a nation has supplanted that of

non-ego. When Kusunoki Masashige said that he would strive to destroy the Imperial enemy by coming back on earth for seven generations, he asserted the Buddhist idea of the continuance of his personal soul or karmic force through many a life. It does not matter whether he actually uttered these words or not. The idea is there, and its truth is recognised by all Japanese, probably in most cases implicitly. Buddhism teaches immortality and personal continuity in karmic or dynamic terms and not always in the psychological. If the Japanese had really followed Buddhism or rightly comprehended it, there would have been no amassing of personal property, no aggrandisement of power political or national, and no murdering, no killing of animals, no cruelty to the helpless, would have prevailed in this country. It will be interesting however for our readers to know that in those localities in Japan where Buddhism wields its influence most, murders, especially cruel ones, are far less frequently committed than in other regions. Still we may contend that environment has a great deal to do with the moulding of character. To a certain extent this is true, and we may say that if Christianity had influenced the Western people in their moral and spiritual development, the racial characteristics of the people themselves have shared much in shaping their own religion in the form as we have it now. If Christianity had grown among the Eastern peoples, it could not have been the same Christianity as the present one. The same can be affirmed of any other religion perhaps with some reservation.

In one sense we may say that all that is worth while in Japanese civilisation is traceable to the influence of Buddhism. Look at those imposing temples, towers, treasure-houses, and statues of various kinds to be found throughout Japan; are they not some of the solidest and most permanent productions of art we can well be proud of? Take Buddhism away from our history, and what have we left in it? All branches of

art, painting, music, sculpture, architecture, and literature, even in its lighter form, owe their existence to Buddhism; how then about agriculture, communication, medicine, and philosophy? Especially about the last mentioned, we could never have acquired such a degree of intellectual acuteness or preparedness as displayed by modern thinkers of Japan.

There are many nations in Europe and in America all embracing the religion of Jesus Christ, but do they manifest the same quality of culture or civilisation in regard to the idea of permanency? When we want to trace the effects of a particular thing, or force, or event, in history or nature, we must first eliminate all such factors as are circumstantial and not directly and essentially concerned with the main issue, and single out just that one thing which would recur under varying conditions and throughout successive changes. This is the scientific way of determining the work of an idea or force. Of course in history this method of determination will be found hard to apply, as we cannot resort to experiment as in the laboratory. What we can do in this case is a comparative study of the histories of different nations of the world. Until this is thoroughly done, we better refrain from jumping to a hasty conclusion.

In our view, the various exhibitions by the Japanese of what critics think as come from the Buddhist idea of impermanency owe their origin largely to the racial character of the people themselves. Shintoism as a national cult and not as a religion consciously teaching a certain set of dogmas, reflects the most fundamental in the ideals of the people, which is the love of cleanliness and simplicity. Plain wood is used for a Shinto shrine, which is periodically reconstructed even before it wears out. The *nusa* is made of paper, and the *sambo* is a flimsy structure of thin board, and neither of them embodies the idea of solidity and permanency. The divine tablet is to be renewed every year. The Japanese ideal of

cleanliness and simplicity naturally leads to the frequent renewal of things we use at home or in public. This cannot be carried out easily unless they are constructed simple, which means in most cases temporariness, superficiality, destructibility, and other cognate ideas all implying lack of steadiness and permanency. Its degenerate form nowadays appears in the muddy streets, leaking gas or water pipes, defective electric fixtures, tottering public buildings, rickety street-cars, etc. Perhaps the abolition of feudalism which was somewhat a permanent institution in the past, caused at least a temporal derangement in the minds of the people, socially, economically, and morally; and they have not yet fully acquired the habit of adjustment when the onrush of Western civilisation in its material garb completely upset the Japanese equilibrium of mind. We are now thus witnessing the worst side of Japanese character manifested in its hideousness.

The worst thing is that Buddhism itself is sharing in this general downward movement of spiritual culture. The state protection during the feudal days had almost completely undermined the original spirit of Buddhism, and when the new régime deprived it of all the material advantages it had been enjoying, the last stroke was dealt to it. While there are at present some signs of its gradual resuscitation not only in its purely personal aspect but in its social and institutional aspect, we are still surrounded by so many instances of corruption and inanity. The weight of historical inertia works both ways good and bad; the bad is to be minimised and the good encouraged to grow nobler and stronger.

We are now standing at a crossway of civilisation and unless we reconstruct our life this modern society may ere long be singing its own dirge over the ruinous confusion of its past achievements. The late world-war most conclusively proved that the life we had been leading was entirely on the

wrong track, though perhaps we could not do any differently, seeing that we are what we are ; but it is high time we may learn a weighty lesson from all the tribulations we have gone through. The lesson is that we have quite neglected the spiritual side of life while loudly talking about it, and that we have laid too much value on the commercial side of our work and labour. Revaluation is what we now need in every department of life. Let not money, or merit, or efficiency, or power, or comfort be the standard of valuation ; but let us have Carlyle's "silent men," who "go two miles with him who shall compel you to go a mile," or those "simple-minded sages who try to fill up an old well with loads of snow," as Buddhists would say.

When Friar Juniper was asked by a poor little woman for alms, he stripped the sumptuously decorated altar of its hanging silver bells, saying, "There are a superfluity," and gave them to her without a second thought. When he was reprimanded by his brother monk, he said. "Be not troubled about these bells, for I have given them to a poor woman that had very great need of them, and here they are of no use, save that they made a show of worldly pomp." Is this not fine? We have so many beautiful temples or cathedrals most ornately adorned, but are they really anything more than a show of worldly pomp even now? The faith that once animated them is dead, they are nothing but monuments of art to be admired by art critics and to be wondered at by those money-makers who privately estimate the cost of labour put to them. Unless we get more of the spirit of Friar Juniper than of the worldly show of the architecture, we shall never be able to build a new spiritual temple in which we are to live a new life after so many years of greed and selfishness.

We have so many, in fact too many, temples and shrines here for the adoration of the personified Prajñāpāramitā as the

highest being of love and truth, but those that are taking charge of them are no more guardians of things holy and sanctifying, they are mere janitors, even dishonest and unreliable and self-seeking and desecrating janitors. In them there is no light that will illumine the darkness of the world, the light that made possible to create such beautiful works of art and worship is vanished, the dark shadow alone is left behind. By the light I mean the spirit of mutual help quietly and silently executed, and by the shadow I mean the asserting of egotism in a clamorous and ostentatious manner. When one does something good or seemingly good, he wants to announce it loudly from an eminence. It may not be necessary to keep good things purposely under a bushel, but publicity, one of the characteristics of modern life, either for good or bad, is to be shunned. Perhaps we have to go even beyond all such considerations as publicity and obscurity, good and evil, light and darkness. For even those who, thinking of the reward of their Father which is in heaven, take heed not to give alms before men, are not quite the most beloved of the children of God. When your left hand knoweth not what your right hand doeth, what room is left in your mind to think of the reward or merit of your doings anywhere, whether in heaven or in hell? When a heart is devoid of all consciousness of gain or loss, or when as Buddhists say, a heart abiding in Emptiness (*sūnyatā*) moves along bathed in the Rays of Eternal Light, Amitābha Buddha, it works miracles. So long as reward is in your sight or merit is thought of, your deeds however good or beneficent, in their relation to the world at large, are doomed, have no religious value whatever, are tainted with the consciousness of *meum et teum*, which is known by Buddhists as *Samskrittacitta* and considered worthless from the transcendental point of view of the highest enlightenment.

When Bodhi-Dharma first interviewed the Emperor of

Liang, the latter asked him, "I have so many temples built and so many monks ordained; what do you think my merit could be?" Answered Dharma shortly, "No merit whatever, sire." The Emperor was one of the most devoted Buddhists in China and himself led an ascetic life of monkhood. He did much towards the spread of Buddhism in Southern China in its early days. But this, according to the First Patriarch of Zen Buddhism in China, was not a meritorious deed. Why? Because if the Emperor were a real Buddhist, he would never have asked Dharma about the religious value of his work. His right hand craved so much to know of the doings of his left. He was not a "silent man" of Carlyle.

When everything is to be computed in some way, we cannot have a real spiritual life. The worse comes to the worst when this computation is commercial, when we have to talk so much about the economic equivalence of our work. As long as we have to keep up this way of judging things, we shall never have the spiritual significance of life fully realised.